

PENTA

Choosing the Right Sparkling Wine for the Holidays

By **Abby Schultz** Dec. 14, 2021 4:15 pm ET



Bottles of the French champagne house Bollinger on a control and quality chain in the village of Ay in the Champagne region of northeast France.

The holiday season is the perfect time for festive bubbles in the glass. But with all the options out there, which sparklers are the best to choose?

For premier wine, the answer is Champagne. Yet, wine drinkers can find excellent bubbles made throughout the world, and Champagne itself yields a range of producers and styles.

Vanessa Conlin, a master of wine and “chief wine officer” at retailer Wine Access in Napa, Calif., advises thinking first about when and where you will be enjoying a sparkling wine, and what style of bubbles are desired.

The “when” question is important because the very best Champagnes are produced in specific vintage years and are meant to be tucked in a cellar to mature and develop layers of flavor.

“If someone is going to open it tonight, or at a holiday party in two weeks, you don’t have to buy a vintage Champagne—those are intended to be able to age, mature, and get better and more complex over time,” Conlin says. Non-vintage Champagnes, however, are created from blending juice from grapes picked across several vintage years with the goal of creating a consistent, reliable drink.

“A vintage Champagne can be delicious, but also in their youth, they may not be as enjoyable as a multi-vintage, because they aren’t meant to show everything right away,” Conlin says.

To Drink or Not to Drink

The “where” question gets to whether the bottle will be opened at a cocktail party, where glasses of sparkling wine are passed around along with hors d’oeuvres, or at a celebratory meal, where a wine can be savored and enjoyed with food.

For a cocktail party, the best bottles are approachable, ready-to-drink, and not incredibly costly.

Options could include wines that are made in the same way as Champagne, but are produced in other regions of France or in other countries.

Champagne is made by the so-called “traditional method,” which means it is fermented twice—first in a stainless steel tank or sometimes in an oak barrel, and secondly, in the bottle. During bottle fermentation, the wine ferments on the lees, or dead yeast cells, which gives it a toasty, biscuity flavor, and a silky touch.

Crémant de Loire and *Crémant de Bourgogne*—sparklers made in the Loire Valley and in Burgundy, respectively—are also produced in the traditional method, but typically can be found at far less expensive price levels.

An example is Langlois-Chateau Crémant de Loire Brut, which sells for about US\$20-US\$25 a bottle and is owned by Champagne Bollinger, a top-notch house.

“It’s such a great value,” Conlin says. “It’s not from the region Champagne, so you are not paying for the branding of that region, but it has the investment and quality of this very prestige Champagne house behind it.” And for a party, she notes, hosts can “pop it by the case and it’s still pretty affordable.”

Other regions making traditional-method sparklers that are worth exploring include Australia’s Tasmania state, and even areas in the U.K., she says, pointing out sparklers

from Bride Valley Vineyard in Dorset, England, that are worth a try. There's also Cava from Spain and Franciacorta from Italy.

Given that many cold climate regions can make great sparklers, fantastic bubbles are even made the traditional way in Armenia. Wine Access often carries Keush Origins Méthode Traditionnelle Brut, a non-vintage wine from Armenia produced from indigenous grapes that sells for about US\$23.

"It's really surprisingly delicious," Conlin says.

Other options could be sparkling wines made solely in stainless steel, with the second fermentation in a pressurized tank. Prosecco from Italy or most Sekt from Germany are made this way, resulting in wines that emphasize the fresh fruit flavors of the grapes.

Champagne With Dinner

If the sparkler is destined instead for a holiday dinner, a choice could be a great multi-vintage Champagne, such as examples from Bollinger or Champagne Billecart-Salmon, or a so-called grower Champagne made and produced by a grape farmer that had traditionally sold grapes to the big houses. Some of these growers do both—make their own Champagne and sell their grapes to prestige houses.

An example of the latter is M. Brugnion Sélection Brut Champagne, a non-vintage wine from a grower that sells fruit to Dom Perignon and Krug, among the region's best houses. Conlin recalls visiting France a few years ago and tasting Brugnion wines for the first time. "They were gorgeous," she says.

While many grower Champagnes are great values, a few are gaining traction in their own right for their quality and scarcity. Before the pandemic, Atul Tiwari, CEO, Americas, of London-based Cult Wines, and a group of wine friends held a blind tasting of prestige Champagne brands against examples from growers.

Although most members of this group had drunk more prestige Champagne in their lifetimes, many ended the evening with two grower Champagne names among their top five picks: Cédric Bouchard of Roses de Jeanne and Jacques Selosse, Tiwari says.

"They are making some great wines," he says.

These particular growers happen to also sell for prestige Champagne prices. Consider Selosse. A 2002-vintage case of the producer's Millesime label traded recently for US\$17,600, up from US\$12,600 a year ago, according to Tiwari.

M. Brugnon's sparklers, however, are available for US\$50 to US\$65 a bottle, depending on the style. To find a grower Champagne look for "RN," or *recoltant manipulant*, on the label, which means the producer grows its own grapes, Conlin says.

Wine Access began to import Brugnon after Conlin's visit, although she worked with the grower to reduce the sweetness in the wine for a U.S. palate. Gauging what sweetness level is desired is where the style of Champagne or sparkling wine comes in.

Most Champagnes carry the term "brut" on their label, which means the wines have up to 12 grams per liter of residual sugar. A trend is to make sparklers that have little to no residual sugar, enhancing their brightness, in a style called "brut nature."

A brut nature Champagne with its more austere taste profile could be perfect for a meal, Conlin says, noting that as an acidic-forward drink it goes well with acidic food and high-fat dishes, such as tempura or fried chicken. Another option could be a rosé champagne, since they are versatile and can be fun to pair with salmon or sushi, she says.

Champagne is actually so "food friendly," Conlin adds, "I like to remind people you don't have to wait for a celebration or holiday."